

## P E R S P E C T I V E S

### Assyrian King Sargon II's Urartu campaign of 714 BC was as sensible as it was ruthless.

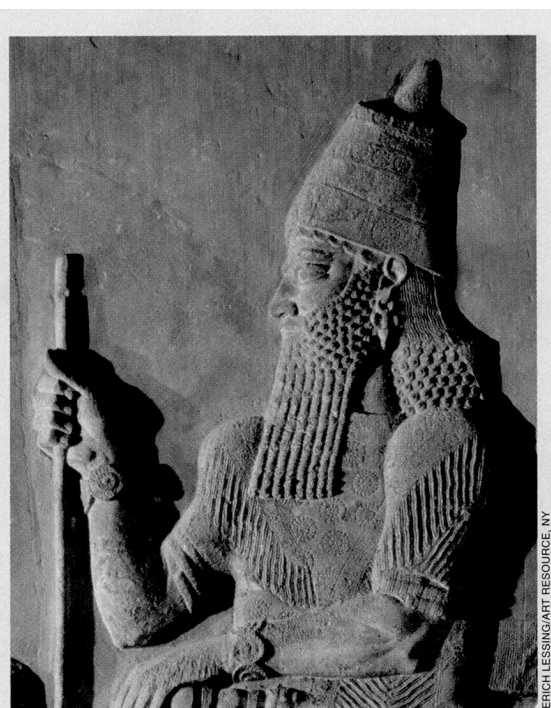
By Brian Todd Carey

**THOUGH HE WAS PROBABLY** a usurper, history remembers Sargon II as one of Assyria's greatest kings. Founder of the Sargonid dynasty that held sway in Mesopotamia for more than a century, he was a capable ruler, a patron of the arts and a prolific builder. His greatest project, the fortress city of Dur-Sharrukin ("Fort Sargon," later Khorsabad), was a city of 80,000 inhabitants situated about 10 miles north of the old capital of Nineveh. His palace there was a wonder of architecture, paneled in alabaster and adorned with sculpture and stone inscriptions recording his military campaigns. There were many to record—in fact, nearly every year of his 17-year reign was marked with a campaign.

In 721 BC, the same year in which he ascended the throne, Sargon attacked the kingdom of Israel and destroyed Samaria, carrying off over 27,000 inhabitants. He then subdued the Elamites, marched west to lay Hamath in ruins and defeated the combined forces of the Philistines and the Egyptians at Raphia. He captured the king of Gaza and enslaved several thousand inhabitants. Two years later he conquered the Hittite capital of Carchemish, capturing the king, his officers and treasures. He then turned his attention toward the northern and northwestern tribes of Armenia, led by the powerful kingdom of Urartu.

Centered on the three major cities of Nimrud, Nineveh and Ashur on the upper Tigris River, in what is now northwestern Iraq, Assyria was cursed with a dearth of natural resources and few natural barriers to keep out enemy invasions. If the kingdom was to survive, it needed to expand at the expense of its better-off neighbors.

Beginning in the 14th century BC, the Assyrians successfully resisted Mitannian, Hittite and Babylonian expansion to finally emerge as a regional power



Sargon II, here portrayed in bas relief at his palace at Dur-Sharrukin, Mesopotamia (now Iraq), was an outstanding military leader even by Assyrian standards.

under Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1077 BC). A renewed phase of expansion began in the 9th century under Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC). By King Tiglath-Pileser III's reign (744-727 BC), the Assyrians had expanded into Syria and Babylonia, securing their western and eastern frontiers. To the north, however, Urartu vied with Assyria for regional dominance.

Besides being Assyria's most powerful rival in the 8th century BC, Urartu enjoyed a geographic advantage, nestled north of the Tigris River valley past the Taurus Mountains in what is now Armenia, a land whose rugged topography has challenged foreign invaders for millennia. Nineveh lay just 30 miles away from the major mountain pass connecting the Urartu with Assyria.

Sargon II inherited the Urartu problem when he came to power in 721. Twice, in 719 and 717, he sent troops north to the region near Lake Urmia to suppress local conflicts supported by Urartu troops. In 715 the Urartu became more aggressive, seizing 22 fortified cities from Ullusunu, an Assyrian vassal in Armenia. Sargon responded by quickly retaking the cities, then laying waste to Urartu's southern provinces. Realizing, however, that small punitive expeditions would not solve his strategic problem for long, the Assyrian monarch resolved to return the following year. It would be his eighth military campaign in seven years.

When Sargon set out for Armenia in 714 BC, he understood the logistical burdens involved. The expedition would march east by northeast and travel over the Zagros Mountains to the land of the Manna, just south of

Lake Urmia. Sargon needed to reestablish contact with his vassal Ullusunu and establish a forward operating base, but crossing the Zagros would be no easy task. The road snaked through numerous passes and valleys, ascending to snow-covered mountain passes and descending into dense forests. According to Sargon's own correspondence, written in the form of a letter to his god Ashur, this terrain was "too rough for chariots to mount, bad for horses, and too steep to march foot soldiers," forcing his engineers to clear obstacles and lay stone to make a suitable road. In between these steep mountains ran swift rivers. Sargon noted that he forded one wandering stream no fewer than 26 times.

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# ABYSSINIAN

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already weakening at this stage, and within minutes the 33rd had achieved its objective, scaling the wall and forcing the defenders to retire behind the inner gate. The troops who got inside then forced open the main gate, and hundreds of wildly cheering British flooded in through the breach.

Even the members of the small band of faithful followers who had stood by Theodore were now running for their lives. Those within earshot heard the emperor cry out: "It is finished! Sooner than fall into his hands I will kill myself." With that he put his pistol to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

A small group of soldiers warily approached the body. One picked up the pistol and noticed an inscription on the handle: "Presented by VICTORIA—Queen of Great Britain and Ireland—to THEODORUS—Emperor of Abyssinia as a slight token of her gratitude for his kindness to her servant PLOWDEN—1864."

A few more gunshots were reported in the confusion, but essentially this was to be the final act of the African melodrama. The Abyssinian king was dead, and the hostages were free and safe. After such a long and arduous campaign, its climax was swift and sudden.

In stark contrast to Theodore's fate, Napier returned in triumph to England, his ascendant reputation evidenced by his newly conferred title—Lord Napier of Magdala. He died peacefully in 1890. As far as the British public was concerned, the ghosts of the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny had been exorcised. Its army could hold its head high again, having achieved a victory that much expert opinion had thought impossible. Its reputation, dearly won in the Napoleonic wars and so abjectly frittered away 40 years later, had been fully restored. "In a little way it was a great campaign," wrote Henry Morton Stanley. "The fame of it resounded with loud reverberations over wide Asia and established England's prestige on a firmer base than ever." **MH**

*Stephen Jarvis writes from Hyde, Cheshire, England. For further reading, he recommends: The Abyssinian Difficulty, by Darrell Bates; The March to Magdala, by Frederick Myatt; and Victorian Military Campaigns, edited by Brian Bond.*

# PERSPECTIVES

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Although no records exist documenting the size of Sargon's expedition, it was probably about 50,000 men. By the 8th century BC, the Assyrians had the largest standing military force in the Middle East, totaling 150,000 to 200,000 men. An Assyrian field army numbered approximately 50,000 men—infantry, cavalry and chariots—and when arrayed for battle had a frontage of 2,500 yards and a depth of 100 yards.

With the exception of an elite royal bodyguard and foreign mercenaries, Assyrian kings relied on a *levée en masse* of farmers as militia. By Sargon II's time, however, the Assyrian army was a combined-arms fighting force of heavy and light infantry, cavalry, chariots and siege machinery supported by units of scouts, engineers, spies and sappers.

On campaign Sargon's army moved in line of column, with scouts sent ahead to reconnoiter the route. While in flat terrain, the king personally led the column from the basket of his war chariot, surrounded by the chariots of his commanders. These were followed by cavalry, infantry, engineers, scribes, diviners, interpreters, intelligence officers and a baggage train consisting of camels and asses. The rear of the column was guarded by light troops, most probably cavalry in open country and infantry in rough terrain. Because of the Urartu's difficult terrain, the Assyrian chariot arm was probably very small, serving only as personal transportation for Sargon and his senior commanders.

**WHEN SARGON REACHED** the land of the Manna, he ordered Ullusun to provide him with large numbers of horses, sheep, cattle and supplies. Using this forward base, Sargon first secured his eastern flank by marching east and south of Lake Urmia into Median territory. Cousins to the Persians (who would later conquer them), the Median governors submitted to Sargon, providing him with the unique tribute of steppe peoples, including "prancing horses, swift mules, camels native to their land, cattle and sheep." Steppe camels were of the two-humped Bactrian variety and were superior to their southern cousins for cold weather operations because of their thick fur and underwool and large, snowshoe-

like feet. With his eastern flank secure, Sargon backtracked west to Manna.

The direct route between Mannean country and Urartu was a straight shot northwest from Lake Urmia to Tuspar (modern Van) on Lake Van. This route not only went through extremely difficult terrain but also was guarded by a string of strong fortresses. Not wanting to march into the waiting mouth of his enemy, Sargon decided to take a more circuitous route around the northern shore of Lake Urmia near Tabriz and then straight west, bypassing the Urartu fortifications. But even this route brought the Assyrian expedition through rough and hostile territory. Checking his siege train, Sargon pushed west and took 12 fortified cities and 84 villages, noting, "I destroyed their walls, I set fire to the houses inside them, I destroyed them like a flood, I battered them into heaps of ruins."

Meanwhile, King Rusa I of Urartu was rallying support from local princes to stop the Assyrian advance well short of its intended target, his capital on Lake Van. Rusa knew the direction of the Assyrian advance, and he decided to intercept Sargon on a flat valley in the mountains southwest of Tabriz. Rusa's strategy was to draw the Assyrians through the defile and into the valley and then smash them before they could deploy from column into line of battle. Unknown to the Urartu pickets, however, Sargon's scouts saw the Urartu deployment in the valley.

Choosing not to move his army piecemeal through the defile, Sargon did the unexpected: He moved it directly over the snow- and ice-covered ridge, descended the other side and deployed in the valley. But the forced march over the ridge took its toll on his soldiers, who were exhausted and operating on light rations. Rusa's troops, on the other hand, were fully deployed and well rested, having arrived several days before. Sargon understood his precarious tactical situation. With no line of retreat, no reinforcements, and an enemy preparing to strike at any moment, he chose to act quickly to gain the initiative.

"I could not relieve their fatigue, nor strengthen the wall of the camp," Sargon wrote. "What was right or left could not be brought to my side, I could not watch the rear.... I plunged into [the enemy's] midst like a swift javelin...."

Riding his war chariot at the head of his bodyguard, Sargon personally led a contingent of 1,000 heavy cavalry straight into one wing of the Urartu formation, shatter-

ing it on impact. The rest of the Assyrians, seeing their king plunge into battle, quickly followed. Rusa's lines did not immediately collapse, however, and at some point during the battle his troops counter-attacked. "The mainstay of his army, bearers of bow and lance, I slaughtered about his feet like lambs, I cut off their heads," Sargon wrote. "His noblemen, councilors who stand before him, I shattered their arms in battle; them and their horses I captured, 260 of his royal kin, who were his officers, governors and cavalry."

In the ensuing chaos, Rusa retreated to his fortified encampment. Sargon pursued and surrounded the king's camp, showering it with arrows and javelins from his light troops. Rusa eventually abandoned his chariot and escaped on horseback, leaving his routed army behind. In typical Assyrian fashion, Sargon ordered a ruthless pursuit that "filled the gullies and gorges with horses while they, like ants in distress, made their way over most difficult terrain. In the heat of my terrible weapons, I went after them, filling the ascents and descents with the corpses of their warriors."

His enemy crushed, Sargon set off for the Urartu capital at Tushpa; systematically destroying every fortress, city and town in the path of his march and leaving thousands dead in his wake. When Sargon reached Tushpa, Rusa fled into the mountains. Sargon entered the city triumphant, then razed it to the ground like "a smashed pot." During this phase of the campaign, Sargon had conducted military operations in all seven of Urartu's provinces and captured or destroyed no fewer than 430 fortified cities, towns and villages.

With the Urartu field army defeated and its king hiding in the mountains, Sargon swung his army around the northern shore of Lake Van and headed south toward the ancient city of Khupushkia (modern Sairt). From there, he ordered his main army home to Dur-Sharrukin. Sargon stayed behind with 1,000 cavalry and struck out for the Urartu cultural center of Musasir. It was there, in the temple dedicated to Haldi, the Urartu war god, that monarchs were crowned and the national treasury was kept. Sargon led his elite striking force east over a seemingly impenetrable mountain pass and sacked the city, returning home with 6,000 captives and Urartu's treasures.

Sargon II, remembered as Sargon the Great, made the best of a difficult strategic situation when he attacked the

Urartu in 714 BC. His campaign was a textbook example of how to conduct a punitive expedition in hostile territory. He shored up his relationship with Ullusunu and made alliances with the Medes, gaining much-needed supplies and protecting his flank. By securing his lines of communication throughout his march, Sargon was able to operate in hostile territory more than 300 miles from his home base. Tactically, he used his combined army to great effect, altering its balance by reducing the number of chariots and increasing his cavalry and infantry to meet the needs of a campaign in rough terrain. Finally, by heading the assault against the Urartu, Sargon—like the pharaoh Ramses II before him and Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror after—led by example and endeared himself to his troops.

**AFTER PACIFYING HIS** northern frontier, Sargon set his attention to the west again. During the first 11 years of his reign, the Kingdom of Judah had remained peacefully subject to Assyria, paying the required annual tribute. But in 711 BC the king of Judah, prompted by the Babylonians, rebelled against the Assyrian monarch. The Israelites were joined by the Phoenicians, the Philistines, the Moabites and the Ammonites. Sargon acted quickly, collecting a powerful army and crushing the insurrection. He then turned his attention to Babylon, routing its army and forcing its king, Merodach-Baladan, to abandon his capital for Beth-Yakin, his ancestral stronghold. Sargon entered Babylonia in triumph, and in the following year he pursued the fleeing king, stormed Beth-Yakin, deported its people, and compelled all the Babylonians and Elamites to pay him tribute. But in 705 Sargon's reign was cut short when he was assassinated on the battlefield. He was succeeded by his son, Sennacherib (705 to 681 BC), a monarch of equal ability and ruthlessness (see *Military History*, October 2001).

In spite of the deadly efficiency of the Assyrian army, Sennacherib's successors were unable to hold onto their imperial possessions. During the 7th century, Assyria faced rebellions by Babylon, the loss of Egypt and the rise of the Medes. Babylon finally won its independence in 626 and, with the help of the Medes, took Ashur in 614 and Nineveh in 612. By 605, the Assyrian empire had ceased to exist, finally defeated by the next builders of imperialism, the short-lived Chaldean dynasty (625-539 BC) of Babylon. **MH**


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